

Congresswoman Louise Slaughter (NY-28) today called on the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to help Tonawanda Coke develop a benzene reduction plan as soon as possible.

In a letter addressed to DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis, Slaughter said, "I appreciate the Department of Environmental Conservation's efforts to address this issue thus far and urge your continued action to ensure that Tonawanda Coke is in compliance with state and federal regulations. Specifically, I ask that your office help develop a benzene reduction plan as soon as possible to significantly reduce benzene emissions from the Tonawanda Coke plant."

Earlier this year, the DEC released findings from an air quality study which found benzene levels to be 75 times greater than New York State guidelines in and around the Town of Tonawanda. Tonawanda Coke was cited as a predominant source of this benzene.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, benzene is a known carcinogen that can have harmful effects on bone marrow and can cause a decrease in red blood cells, excessive bleeding, and compromise the immune system.

Slaughter has already written to the Environmental Protection Agency earlier this month and is set to speak with EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson next week bringing the concerns Tonawanda residents to her attention. Her office is in constant contact with the Clean Air Coalition.

A full copy of the letter is below:

October 22, 2009

The Honorable Pete Grannis
Commissioner
NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
625 Broadway
Albany, NY 12233

Dear Commissioner Grannis,

I write to request your help in addressing the elevated benzene levels that are jeopardizing the health of residents in and around Tonawanda, New York. I appreciate the Department of Environmental Conservation's efforts to address this issue thus far and urge your continued action to ensure that Tonawanda Coke is in compliance with state and federal regulations. Specifically, I ask that your office help develop a benzene reduction plan as soon as possible to significantly reduce benzene emissions from the Tonawanda Coke plant.

Benzene is a known carcinogen that according to the Center for Disease Control causes harmful effects on bone marrow and can cause a decrease in red blood cells, excessive bleeding, and compromise the immune system. Alarmingly, the Tonawanda air quality study released by your agency this year found significantly high concentrations of benzene in the air in and around the Town of Tonawanda that greatly exceed the state average. Specifically, the study found that regional benzene levels are 75 times greater than New York State guidelines and that Tonawanda Coke is a predominant source of this benzene.

Every day local residents, many of whom are already suffering from numerous health problems, are breathing this air and being exposed to hazardous chemicals like benzene. While regulatory agency involvement has helped spur Tonawanda Coke to begin reducing ammonia emissions from the facility's ammonia still, it is critical for the DEC to similarly act to help craft a Benzene Reduction Plan to ensure Tonawanda Coke operates safely for its workers and neighbors.

I appreciate the DEC's continued focus to address this air quality situation and request that you continue to keep my office and local residents informed of ongoing developments. Thank you for your consideration of these concerns. Please contact Zena Shuber Dorsey, in my Buffalo District Office at 716-853-5813 if my office can address any questions or be of any assistance with this request.

Sincerely,

Louise M. Slaughter
Member of Congress